

Press Release  
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## **For immigrants to Sweden, integration is a two way street**

**Every sixth person in Sweden was born in another country. 2014 showed record high immigration figures, in particular, a growing number of asylum seekers.**

**What happens after immigration to Sweden remains one of the hottest debates around the country. The main crux: how best to integrate immigrants into the Swedish workforce and society, and how to provide them with opportunities and equal rights.**

One important piece of the puzzle is learning the Swedish language. SFI, or “Swedish for Immigrants”, is a voluntary free language program available to all immigrants who don’t have Swedish language skills. Students can study, essentially, as much and as long as they would like. With about 120,000 students per year, SFI classes gather a real mix of student backgrounds, cultures, and reasons for being in Sweden.

“When a person learns a new language, she will be a new person”, says SFI student Alaa Rushdan, who fled the war in Syria. She hopes for a stable life for her family and plans to become a social worker, as she was back home before the war.

Classmate Alexa Theron moved to Sweden from the UK with her French boyfriend. She feels a kinship with her student group. “We’ve all come in from another country...we have to figure out how to work, how to get a job, how to find a flat, how to integrate into society”.

Interestingly, even with this generous free language program, many immigrants still struggle with Swedish, and find it very hard to find jobs. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights the slow integration of immigrants as a real problem in its recent 2015 Economic Survey of Sweden. The report recommends that Sweden do better to help immigrants become fully integrated into the workplace and society, pointing to language proficiency as a key factor. The report suggests “enhancing support and incentives” for immigrants to learn Swedish; for example, requiring Swedish language training as part of government subsidised work programs.

Language education alone is, of course, only part of the equation. When former SFI teacher Ebba Åkerman noticed most of her students lived in primarily immigrant areas, she was struck by what she saw as segregation in her own city, as well as the limited contact that her students had with native Swedes. She started the “Department of Invitations” project, connecting recent immigrants with native Swedes for a casual dinner their homes. The program has grown over the past year, been replicated in other countries, and garnered a lot of attention in the Swedish and international press.

When asked what can be achieved over just one dinner, Åkerman smiles, “The ideal dinner is delightful and fun but I also hope that you gain a better understanding of how things works in Swedish society. Also knowing more about what it’s like to be an immigrant in Swedish society, that you learn something new about another culture, and that you feel you are doing

something to create a more inclusive society...”.

It can be a challenge for citizens of a small and historically homogenous country to understand the value that immigrants bring to society.

The Swedish education system does however, recognize the importance of maintaining immigrants’ cultural connection to their home country and language. Students with a family connection to another country are offered free home language classes. This begs the question: Why should Swedish taxpayers spend 100 million Euros per year on “home language” education? How does this benefit Swedish society as a whole?

Mats Wennerholm, Director of Education for the National Agency for Education responds, “Well educated people, able to use many languages, are a strong resource for our country, and also a strong resource...to develop their personal identities and to be both multilingual and multicultural in their lives”. In other words, there is an overall economic upside to a multilingual, multicultural Sweden.

But society here is still working out how it feels about all this. Ebba Åkerman reflects, “We talk about needing a key to society—that can be a course, instruction or other tools needed to enter society. But a key is quite useless if you don’t have a door that actually opens when you use it”. She continues, “I would like Swedes to see what Sweden is actually looking like today. It is a big social experiment like most of Europe and the world. I would like Swedes to get a better understanding of what it is like to be an immigrant, and how we can improve this society together”.

See the Video News Release and Broll, to share and download, on <http://mediaroom.sweden.se>

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##### **2015 OECD Economic Survey of Sweden (March 30, 2015, in English)**

Full results:

<http://www.oecd.org/sweden/economic-survey-sweden.htm>

Summary:

<http://www.slideshare.net/oecd/economy/oecdmainfindingswedengrowthandskills>

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**Other links:**

Information on SFI from Skolverket (in Swedish)

<http://www.skolverket.se/skolformer/vuxenutbildning/utbildning-i-svenska-for-invandrare>

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